

Nauvoo Legion-Lehi Militia
Lehi Yesteryears
by Richard Van Wagoner

From the earliest years of American history, the country has maintained a militia of citizen-soldiers trained for rapid deployment. One of Utah Territory's first laws created a militia known as "The Nauvoo Legion," named after an earlier Mormon organization in Illinois. The Legion's officers were generally LDS Church officials such as Apostle George A. Smith.

Smith, in charge of all militia groups south of Salt Lake City, first called Lehi's unit to arms on July 25, 1853 during the Walker War. Though the local troop did not engage in any Indian fights at this time, it did supervise the construction of a fort and a defense parapet.

Much of the militia men's time was actually spent guarding the community's stock herd. Few local accounts of guard duty are as intriguing as Gideon A. Murdock's. The thirteen-year-old lad, on his first night watch in the Big Field near Utah Lake, was awakened at midnight and handed an old U.S. musket loaded with three rifle balls and primed with a heavy charge of powder.

I did not know which I was worst scared of, "Murdock later recalled, "the musket or the indians." Near daybreak, "the proper time for Indians to be looking round to see what meanness they could do, the young militiaman thought he could see an Indian creeping along the fence line. Though filled with fear the youngster dropped onto his belly and began crawling along a ditch towards the invader. Before he reached his objective, it became light enough to see that instead of stalking an Indian warrior he had merely been worried by a "bunch of Rabbit Brush" blowing in the wind. Murdock, despite his brush with the brush, was afterwards recognized as a "full-fledged" soldier and had his name recorded on the local militia roll.

Lehi's first militia leaders, elected by townsmen on May 11, 1854 was William Sidney S. Willes. Territorial Governor Brigham Young officially commissioned him ten months later as "Captain of Company A, Lehi Post, of Utah Military District of the Nauvoo Legion and of the Utah Militia."

Born in Jefferson County, New York on March 18, 1819, Willes and his brother Ira were mustered as privates into Company B of the famed Mormon Battalion which made one of the the longest infantry marches in recorded military history.

After arriving in Utah, the Willes brothers settled in Lehi during early 1851. Along with the Permilia Lott, John L. Lott, John R. Murdock, Orrace C. Murdock and Isaac Losee families, Sidney Willes settled near Utah Lake at the south end of present-day Fifth West in an area then known as Lottville.

Willes married Alizina L. Lott, daughter of Permilia Darrow Lott on April 23, 1852. Recognized as fearless and quick thinking, Captain Willes led several local military campaigns in the 1850's and 1860's. He was elected "Major of the Second Regiment, First Brigade, Second Division, Nauvoo Legion, Utah Militia" on December 21, 1866 after returning from a three-year mission in England.

The only engagement of the Lehi militia which resulted in local deaths occurred during the winter of 1856. American Indians had lived in Cedar Valley, Tintic Valley, and the Lake Mountains for perhaps hundreds of years and it was only natural that they resented the Mormon presence on their ancestral lands. When a small group of men, including brothers John, George, and Washington Carson settled around the springs in Fairfield in 1855, the Indians viewed their stock as fair game.

To halt the depredations, a posse of ten Provo men under the direction of Deputy Marshal Thomas S. Johnson was dispatched with writs of arrest for Indians including Tintic, the band's leader. Arriving at the Indian camp just east of Fairfield on February 22, Deputy Sheriff Parish grabbed the Indian leader by the hair and said "Tintic, you are

my prisoner.” But he was not about to be taken and began struggling with the officer. During the ensuing fight, George Carson was killed along with several Indians including Tintic’s brother Battest. Tintic escaped with a wounded hand, and his band scattered in several different directions.

Later that day the enraged Indians killed and horribly mutilated Carson’s brother Washington and Henry Moran, who were herding cattle a few miles away. Shortly after this, the renegades abducted thirteen-year-old herdsman Lewis Hunsaker in Goshen Valley and tortured him to death.

Two days later, Sunday, February 24, Captain Willes mobilized a troop consisting of William Clark, James Lamb, John Glines John Karren, John Catlin, George Winn, William Skeens, Joseph Cousins, Frank Milin, Sylvanus Collett, Alonzo D. Rhodes, George Coleman and John S. Lott. The posse left town about 4:00 p.m. and traveled across frozen Utah Lake to Pelican Point. Their mission was to “bring the families and cattle from the herd ground to save them from the Indians.”

The men spent Monday gathering the cattle and then started to drive them home on Tuesday. At sunset they camped near a grove of cedars at the Mounds, south of Pelican Point. A beef was killed and supper eaten around a roaring fire as the night promised even colder conditions. Unaware of the fatalism of his wit, Joseph Cousins joked that “if the Indians kill me, I wish to die with a full stomach.” Having eaten their fill, he and Sylvanus Collett hiked further up the mountainside for firewood.

As they were felling a cedar, Collett looked up, saw an Indian, and yelled for Cousins to run. Immobilized by fear, the stricken man was shot three times and scalped. Collett reached the camp just ahead of the Indian attack from approximately fifteen braves who forced the Lehi men to retreat to a better position near the lakeshore. During the assault, John Catlin was killed and young George Winn so gravely wounded that two days later he died. John Glines crossed the ice in darkness to reach town by daybreak. A relief company returned with him the next morning to bring home the dejected men, their dead,

and the dying Winn.

During the heat of the firefight the night before, John Karren and George Coleman's clothing had been pierced by bullets, and William Clark had been wounded in the lower lip. Close examination showed that the injury came from a flying piece of rock kicked up by an Indian bullet--Clark's mistaken cry of "I am shot, boys, I am shot," provided high glee for town humorists. But the surviving militiamen never forgot that endless night listening for sounds of further Indian attack while hearing only the agonized death groans of George Winn.

Winn, Cousins, and Catlin were given a heroes' funeral in the unfinished Lehi Meeting House on February 28. The three fallen militiamen were buried in a common grave on the west end of the old cemetery on State Street.

Lehi's militiamen, stout-hearted though poorly equipped, were also called up during the Utah War (1857-58), the Salmon River Expedition (1858), and the Black Hawk War (1865-67). Though they experienced several hair-raising experiences no Lehi men were killed in any of these actions.

The Utah War came about shortly after President James Buchanan was inaugurated. The new president appointed Alfred Cumming of George to replace Brigham Young as Utah's governor. Misinformation had led Buchanan to believe the Mormons were in rebellion against the government. To bolster Cumming's authority and to "quell the rebellion," Buchanan ordered a large military force to accompany the new governor westward.

As the Utah Expeditionary Forces entered Wyoming, an order from Brigham activated nearly eleven hundred territorial militiamen to oppose the invading army. In September 1857, Captain Willes mustered a calvary company consisting of Newal A. Brown, Sylvanus Collett, William Fotheringham, Riley Judd, John Karren, John S. Lott, George Merrel, Frank Molen, Wesley Molen, J. Wiley Norton, William Skeens, David Taylor, and Joseph A. Thomas. These men joined forces with Captain Lot Smith on the

high plains of Wyoming to harass the military by driving off stock, destroying animal fodder, and burning supply trains.

Early on the morning of March 8, 1858 the rapid beating of the community signal drum called Lehi men to the Meeting House. Volunteers were requested to rescue embattled Mormon colonists at Fort Limhi on the Salmon River in Idaho. Captain Willes hurriedly assembled a troop of men consisting of Andrew Anderson, George Barber, Newal A. Brown, Samuel Cousins, Benjamin Cutler, William Dawson, Ole Ellingson, Israel Evans, John Glines, Abram Hatch, Riley Judd, James Lamb, George Merrell, Henry McConnell, Frank Molen, Wesley Molen, Henry Norton, David Skeens, William Skeens, David Taylor, Joseph A. Thomas, and William H. Winn.

The poorly clad men, most without overcoats and wearing moccasins and underwear made from rough wagon-cover canvas, joined a two hundred-man force at Ogden on March 11. After helping rescue the surrounded Idaho settlers, the Lehi men returned to town in early April without the loss of a single life.

Sidney Willes was known locally as “Captain Fearnaught”. In addition to his military and religious accomplishments, Willes also served on Lehi’s first city council after the city was incorporated. While serving as Lehi City sextant, Willes also operated a saw mill at the mouth of American Fork Canyon in 1870-71. While the large circular saw was in operation William dropped a monkey wrench into the saw pit. Thinking there was room to retrieve the tool without stopping the mechanism, he let himself down into the pit. While he was reaching for the wrench, the whirling blade snagged his pants and horribly mangled his leg. He died of blood poisoning a few days later on February 3, 1871.

Andrew Fjeld, a contemporary of Willes, recalled that in early Lehi “the name of Captain Sidney Willes was on every tongue, every one knew him and delighted to tell something about his many useful and outstanding traits of character.” Fjeld, five years old at the time of Willes’ death, later wrote that he looked on “the face of Sidney Willes as he lay in his homemade coffin in the middle of the room in the Meeting House.

During the funeral the small boy noted a “very large Indian man clad in a very beautifully trimmed buckskin suit, all bedecked with beads...he stood there just like a statue, a very impressive figure”. Fjeld also remembered the impressive military funeral and the lengthy cortage which followed the remains of Captain Willes to his final resting place in the new cemetery on the sand hill north of town. His well-earned epitaph, penned by a son proclaimed: “Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it well.”